

Essay: In Distrust of Movements by Wendell Berry

I HAVE HAD WITH MY friend Wes Jackson a number of useful conversations about the necessity of getting out of movements — even movements that have seemed necessary and dear to us — when they have lapsed into self-righteousness and self-betrayal, as movements seem almost invariably to do. People in movements too readily learn to deny to others the rights and privileges they demand for themselves. They too easily become unable to mean their own language, as when a “peace movement” becomes violent. They often become too specialized, as if finally they cannot help taking refuge in the pinhole vision of the institutional intellectuals. They almost always fail to be radical enough, dealing finally in effects rather than causes. Or they deal with single issues or single solutions, as if to assure themselves that they will not be radical enough.

And so I must declare my dissatisfaction with movements to promote soil conservation or clean water or clean air or wilderness preservation or sustainable agriculture or community health or the welfare of children. Worthy as these and other goals may be, they cannot be achieved alone. I am dissatisfied with such efforts because they are too specialized, they are not comprehensive enough, they are not radical enough, they virtually predict their own failure by implying that we can remedy or control effects while leaving causes in place. Ultimately, I think, they are insincere; they propose that the trouble is caused by other people; they would like to change policy but not behaviour.

The worst danger may be that a movement will lose its language either to its own confusion about meaning and practice, or to pre-emption by its enemies. I remember, for example, my naïve confusion at learning that it was possible for advocates of organic agriculture to look upon the “organic method” as an end in itself. To me, organic farming was attractive both as a way of conserving nature and as a strategy of survival for small farmers.

Imagine my surprise in discovering that there could be huge “organic” monocultures. And so I was not too surprised by the recent attempt of the United States Department of Agriculture to appropriate the “organic” label for food irradiation, genetic engineering, and other desecrations of the corporate food economy. Once we allow our language to mean anything that anybody wants it to mean, it becomes impossible to mean what we say. When “homemade” ceases to mean neither more nor less than “made at home”, then it means anything, which is to say that it means nothing.

AS YOU SEE, I have good reasons for declining to name the movement I think I am a part of. I am reconciled to the likelihood that from time to time it will name itself and have slogans, but I am not going to use its slogans or call it by any of its names.

Let us suppose that we have a Nameless Movement for Better Land Use and that we know we must try to keep it active, responsive and intelligent for a long time. What must we do?

What we must do above all, I think, is try to see the problem in its full size and difficulty. If we are concerned about land abuse, then we must see that this is an economic problem. Every economy is, by definition, a land-using economy. If we are using our land wrongly, then something is wrong with our economy. This is difficult. It becomes more difficult when we recognize that, in modern times, every one of us is a member of the economy of everybody else.

But if we are concerned about land abuse, we have begun a profound work of economic criticism. Study of the history of land use (and any local history will do) informs us that we have had for a long time an economy that thrives by undermining its own

foundations. Industrialism, which is the name of our economy, and which is now virtually the only economy of the world, has been from its beginnings in a state of riot. It is based squarely upon the principle of violence toward everything on which it depends, and it has not mattered whether the form of industrialism was communist or capitalist or whatever; the violence toward nature, human communities, traditional agricultures and local economies has been constant. The bad news is coming in, literally, from all over the world. Can such an economy be fixed without being radically changed? I don't think it can.

The Captains of Industry have always counselled the rest of us to be "realistic". Let us, therefore, be realistic. Is it realistic to assume that the present economy would be just fine if only it would stop poisoning the air and water, or if only it would stop soil erosion, or if only it would stop degrading watersheds and forest ecosystems, or if only it would stop seducing children, or if only it would quit buying politicians, or if only it would give women and favoured minorities an equitable share of the loot? Realism, I think, is a very limited programme, but it informs us at least that we should not look for bird eggs in a cuckoo clock.

OR WE CAN SHOW the hopelessness of single-issue causes and single-issue movements by following a line of thought such as this: We need a continuous supply of uncontaminated water. Therefore, we need (among other things) soil-and-water-conserving ways of agriculture and forestry that are not dependent on monoculture, toxic chemicals, or the indifference and violence that always accompany big-scale industrial enterprises on the land.

Therefore, we need diversified, small-scale land economies that are dependent on people. Therefore, we need people with the knowledge, skills, motives and attitudes required by diversified, small-scale land economies. And all this is clear and comfortable enough, until we recognize the question we have come to: Where are the people?

Well, all of us who live in the suffering rural landscapes of the United States know that most people are available to those landscapes only recreationally. We see them bicycling or boating or hiking or camping or hunting or fishing or driving along and looking around. They do not, in Mary Austin's phrase, "summer and winter with the land". They are unacquainted with the land's human and natural economies. Though people have not progressed beyond the need to eat food and drink water and wear clothes and live in houses, most people have progressed beyond the domestic arts — the husbandry and wifery of the world — by which those needful things are produced and conserved. In fact, the comparative few who still practise that necessary husbandry and wifery often are inclined to apologize for doing so, having been carefully taught in our education system that those arts are degrading and unworthy of people's talents. Educated minds, in the modern era, are unlikely to know anything about food and drink, clothing and shelter. In merely taking these things for granted, the modern educated mind reveals itself also to be as superstitious a mind as ever has existed in the world. What could be more superstitious than the idea that money brings forth food?

I AM NOT SUGGESTING, of course, that everybody ought to be a farmer or a forester. Heaven forbid! I am suggesting that most people now are living on the far side of a broken connection, and that this is potentially catastrophic. Most people are now fed, clothed and sheltered from sources toward which they feel no gratitude and exercise no responsibility. There is no significant urban constituency, no formidable consumer lobby, no noticeable political leadership, for good land-use practices, for good farming and good forestry, for restoration of abused land, or for halting the destruction of land by so-called "development".

We are involved now in a profound failure of imagination. Most of us cannot imagine the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history beyond the farm. Most people cannot imagine the forest and the

forest economy that produced their houses and furniture and paper; or the landscapes, the streams and the weather that fill their pitchers and bathtubs and swimming pools with water. Most people appear to assume that when they have paid their money for these things they have entirely met their obligations.

Money does not bring forth food. Neither does the technology of the food system. Food comes from nature and from the work of people. If the supply of food is to be continuous for a long time, then people must work in harmony with nature. That means that people must find the right answers to a lot of hard practical questions. The same applies to forestry and the possibility of a continuous supply of timber.

One way we could describe the task ahead of us is by saying that we need to enlarge the consciousness and the conscience of the economy. Our economy needs to know — and care — what it is doing. This is revolutionary, of course, if you have a taste for revolution, but it is also a matter of common sense.

Undoubtedly some people will want to start a movement to bring this about. They probably will call it the Movement to Teach the Economy What It Is Doing — the mtewiid. Despite my very considerable uneasiness, I will agree to this, but on three conditions.

My first condition is that this movement should begin by giving up all hope and belief in piecemeal, one-shot solutions. The present scientific quest for odourless hog manure should give us sufficient proof that the specialist is no longer with us. Even now, after centuries of reductionist propaganda, the world is still intricate and vast, as dark as it is light, a place of mystery, where we cannot do one thing without doing many things, or put two things together without putting many things together. Water quality, for example, cannot be improved without improving farming and forestry, but farming and forestry cannot be improved without improving the education of consumers — and so on.

The proper business of a human economy is to make one whole thing of ourselves and this world. To make ourselves into a practical wholeness with the land under our feet is maybe not altogether possible — how would we know? — but, as a goal, it at least carries us beyond hubris, beyond the utterly groundless assumption that we can subdivide our present great failure into a thousand separate problems that can be fixed by a thousand task forces of academic and bureaucratic specialists. That programme has been given more than a fair chance to prove itself, and we ought to know by now that it won't work.

My second condition is that the people in this movement (the mtewiid) should take full responsibility for themselves as members of the economy. If we are going to teach the economy what it is doing, then we need to learn what we are doing. This is going to have to be a private movement as well as a public one. If it is unrealistic to expect wasteful industries to be conservers, then obviously we must lead in part the public life of complainers, petitioners, protesters, advocates and supporters of stricter regulations and saner policies. But that is not enough.

If it is unreasonable to expect a bad economy to try to become a good one, then we must go to work to build a good economy. It is appropriate that this duty should fall to us, for good economic behaviour is more possible for us than it is for the great corporations with their miseducated managers and their greedy and oblivious stockholders. Because it is possible for us, we must try in every way we can to make good economic sense in our own lives, in our households, and in our communities. We must do more for ourselves and our neighbours. We must learn to spend our money with our friends and not with our enemies. But to do this it is necessary to

renew local economies and revive the domestic arts.

In seeking to change our economic use of the world, we are seeking inescapably to change our lives. The outward harmony that we desire between our economy and the world depends finally upon an inward harmony between our own hearts and the originating spirit that is the life of all creatures, a spirit as near us as our flesh and yet forever beyond the measures of this obsessively measuring age. We can grow good wheat and make good bread only if we understand that we do not live by bread alone.

My third condition is that this movement should content itself to be poor. We need to find cheap solutions, solutions within the reach of everybody, and the availability of a lot of money prevents the discovery of cheap solutions. The solutions of modern medicine and modern agriculture are all staggeringly expensive, and this is caused in part, and maybe altogether, because of the availability of huge sums of money for medical and agricultural research.

Too much money, moreover, attracts administrators and experts as sugar attracts ants — look at what is happening in our universities. We should not envy rich movements that are organized and led by an alternative bureaucracy living on the problems it is supposed to solve. We want a movement that is a movement because it is advanced by all its members in their daily lives.

NOW, HAVING COMPLETED this very formidable list of the problems and difficulties, fears and fearful hopes that lie ahead of us, I am relieved to see that I have been preparing myself all along to end by saying something cheerful. What I have been talking about is the possibility of renewing human respect for this Earth and all the good, useful and beautiful things that come from it. I have made it clear, I hope, that I don't think this respect can be adequately enacted or conveyed by tipping our hats to nature or by representing natural loveliness in art or by prayers of thanksgiving or by preserving tracts of wilderness — although I recommend all those things. The respect I mean can be given only by using well the world's goods that are given to us. This good use, which renews respect — which is the only currency, so to speak, of respect — also renews our pleasure. The callings and disciplines that I have spoken of as the domestic arts are stationed all along the way from the farm to the prepared dinner, from the forest to the dinner table, from stewardship of the land to hospitality to friends and strangers. These arts are as demanding and gratifying, as instructive and as pleasing, as the so-called "fine arts". To learn them is, I believe, the work that is our profoundest calling. Our reward is that they will enrich our lives and make us glad.

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